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ABSTRACT

The motivational value of Virginia's Public Education Network (VA PEN), specifically the Thomas Jefferson On-line discussion group, is examined in this study. The instructional value of the network with respect to student motivation in fourth grade students of varied ability was gauged through observation of actual hands-on network experience, assessment of work aired on the network, and personal interviews. Additional sources of information include published literature, on-line discussion articles, observations in the field, and interviews with facilitators of VA PEN. Results of the study concur with existing research, indicating that telecommunications applications such as VA PEN are valuable instructional tools. Students using the network were more motivated and enthusiastic about writing and social studies as a result of the their telecommunications with Thomas Jefferson. The network generated a larger peer audience for the students' work and enhanced student performance. Examples of student work downloaded from VA PEN are attached. (Contains 11 references.) (Author/KRN)

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Instructional Applications of Virginia's Public Education Network (VA PEN): Thomas Jefferson On-Line

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Running Head: VA PEN - History Comes Alive with Thomas Jefferson On-Line

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Abstract

The motivational value of Virginia's Public Education Network (VAPEN), specifically the Thomas Jefferson On-line discussion group, is examined in this study. The instructional value of the network with respect to student motivation in fourth grade students of varied ability is gauged through observation of actual hands-on network experience, assessment of work aired on the network, and personal interviews. Additional sources of information include published literature, on-line discussion articles, observations in the field, and interviews with facilitators of VA PEN. Results of the study concur with existing research and indicate that telecommunications applications such as VAPEN are valuable instructional tools. Students using the network were more motivated and enthusiastic about writing and social studies as a result of their telecommunications with Thomas Jefferson. The network generated a larger peer audience for the students' work and likewise enhance pupil performance.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Educating Students for the Future

In modern society a new era is emerging. We are rapidly moving toward an increasingly complex and technological period of history. In order for our nation to keep up with this trend, it is important that we reflect this shift in our educational system. Today's children will be faced with a more complex world than that of their parents. In the age of information, it is essential that we prepare our students for what lies ahead. Through integration of computer and communication technology in our schools we can prepare our children for the exciting opportunities ahead.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to gauge the motivational effect telecommunications has toward student writing, specifically in the area of social studies. Numerous studies have indicated that telecommunications used in instructional applications increases student motivation and interest and improves the overall quality of their work. By introducing a group of fourth grade students to the educational and communication opportunities created by a telecommunications network, I hope to establish that the History Exchange of

the Virginia Public Education Network, VA Pen, can also be used to motivate students and improve pupil performance in writing and communication skills specifically in the content area of social studies.

Overview

This paper is divided into several sections. Chapter 2 is a review of the existing literature on the use of telecommunications for instructional applications. Chapter 3 details the methodology of the study in terms of design and analysis. Chapter 4 is an analysis of the study results followed by concluding remarks in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The value of computer aided instruction in the classroom has been documented in numerous studies. Computers provide a wealth of experiences for students. Whether it's drill and practice or simulation activities, the computer has proven to be an excellent source of educational opportunity and motivation. Telecommunications is a logical and relatively inexpensive extension of the existing computer technology that we have in most of our schools.

Technological Progress

Over the past few years, great strides have been made in the area of telecommunications via computers and phone lines. It is now possible for people on different continents to carry on conversations via their computers. Networking has created an opportunity for exchange of knowledge and information that was only dreamed of decades ago. All that is needed is a modem, a phone line, and a computer.

Evolution of the Networks

During the early 1980's, a group of educators realized the enormous potential that telecommunications offered. (Bull, Harris, Loyd, and Short

1989) As a result, Glen Bull and others at the University of Virginia developed a plan to link teachers and university students directly with telephone lines and computers. The plan received a grant from IBM Academic Information Systems and the Teacher-Link network began. This early system was on a small scale. It was designed to link teachers and education students to professors at the Curry School of Education.

The results of the study were positive. Students were able to access their professors easier than before. No longer did they have to play phone tag to reach a professor, they could simply leave a message on electronic mail that could be answered by the professor from the office or home. Students could open up discussions about issues in education or seek out advice from professionals or peers.

The success of the initial program was evident. As a result of the increased educational opportunities telecommunications offered, the Education Department of the state of Virginia began a statewide effort to link all schools on a telecommunications network modeled after Teacher-Link. (Wells, 1993)

VA PEN

The result of this statewide effort was Virginia PEN, the Virginia Public Education Network. This network was first available to most schools

across the state for use by teachers and administrators. Virginia PEN initially provided the electronic mail service whereby any user with an account could send or receive messages from any other user in the state or anywhere in the world. Virginia PEN allows its users to access a wide variety of resources and on-line discussions.

Originally, the Virginia PEN network was designed for administrative purposes. (Wells, 1993) But as the success of the network became apparent, the original goals were expanded. Virginia PEN will eventually connect 2,000 schools in 137 districts across the state of Virginia. (Mason and Mason, 1991) Teachers using the network have discovered great potential for instructional application in the classroom. These teachers are currently experimenting with the instructional capability of the network, and the results thus far have been very encouraging. A number of electronic dialogues and resource services have been initiated with great success.

Thomas Jefferson On-line

Thomas Jefferson on-line is an example of an electronic dialogue that appeared to be very successful. Students can actually write Thomas Jefferson and receive responses in Jeffersonian dialogue. TJ on-line began on a small scale in 1990 as part of the Governor's School. Initially, the on-line

discussion with Jefferson, actually a graduate student from the Curry School of education named Jerrady Hochella, occurred only while the Governor's School was in session. Because the initial venture was such a success, the project became a year round discussion group on VAPEN. What began as a limited experiment soon turned into a very active and frequently used discussion group. Because of this increase in volume, the discussion group was eventually transferred to the Monticello Education Department, whose staff was already answering the majority of inquiries in one way or another. Currently, Thomas Jefferson on-line questions are answered by Robin Gabriel, better known as Thomas Jefferson with the help of the research department at Monticello. (Gabriel, 1993)

Other Successful Network Ventures

These informal experiments and numerous formal studies of telecommunications networks have illustrated their value as an educational tool. Teachers report that use of telecommunications in classrooms provides a whole new dimension to learning. Use of telecommunications motivates students to get involved in their education. They become active participants in the exchanges and communication that occurs. Actively communicating with a live person in a distant community is very different than the passive traditional

textbook approach to education. (Mulligan & Gore, 1992) Three successful network ventures in addition to VA PEN include the Fredmail Network out of UNC-Asheville, the Earth Lab from Bank Street College, and the World Peace On-line Discussion Group.

Fredmail Network

Educators have found a renewed sense of purpose in the writing of students who are submitting work to a larger audience of their peers in other parts of the world. A discussion of the novel Charlotte's Web was initiated by teacher education students at the University of North Carolina at Asheville. The discussion involved students from the Asheville area and Australia and proved extremely successful. Facilitators of the discussion noted that telecommunications like Fredmail, provided student writers with a real audience and purpose for their writing (McGlinn, 1991). McGlinn notes that "telecomputing thus directly motivates the writing process and students' efforts to write correctly and thoughtfully".

Earth Lab

Researchers working with the Earth Lab project at the Bank Street College of Education have noted a greater level of cooperation among students who are working on projects for use on the network. (Durham and Sunal,

1991) Earth Lab was a cooperative network venture involving students in the collection and analysis of data. Students participants in the study were from Harlem and other areas of New York, Boston, and Hawaii. During the Earth Lab project, researchers noted that students "...worked together, thought out their problems, gathered their own data instead of relying on textbooks and teachers, and came to their own conclusions". (Durham and Sunal, 1991)

World Peace On-line

Another on-line discussion group connected junior high schools around the globe in a project designed to create an organization for overseeing world peace. The facilitators in this exchange noted the increased level of student motivation as a result of the distance communication. Bill Burrall, a teacher involved with the project said, "the students used their own creativity to compose their ideas, work cooperatively toward an end result, and then exchange their work with long-distance partners". (Burrall, 1992)

Literature Summary

In summary, the literature suggests that telecommunications has apparent instructional value when used in these and numerous other instances. Students working with telecommunications applications were found to be more motivated and enthusiastic toward their work. Improvement in overall quality

of work produced by students when they were writing for the larger network audience was noted in numerous cases. Finally, increased cooperation among students working together on projects for the network was similarly observed during these projects.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

Entry and Access

This study was conducted as my Master's Field Research Project. Access to the study participants was arranged by the Curry School of Education with permission of my Clinical Instructor from my student teaching experience. Students were given the option of whether or not they wanted to participate in the study with all agreeing to take part.

Setting

This study took place a local school. The school has a computer lab that is used by the whole school. Recently, a terminal specifically installed for accessing Virginia PEN and its on-line discussions was placed in the library. The librarian reports that it is seldom used. Two other classes in the school have modems and access to Virginia PEN. These classes are second and third grade.

Participants

In this study, I randomly selected a group of students from a class that previously had limited or no experience with the telecommunications network

Virginia PEN. The participants were from a fourth grade classroom. These students were of varied ability levels and were a heterogenous sampling of the school population which has a minority population of 32%. Two of the students have a computer in their home, with the others having used them solely at school. Most of the students in the study began using computers in the second grade. The students use computers at school an average of two times per week for a total of a hour, primarily for mathematics drill and practice activities. Descriptions of the primary participants are listed below.

Martha

Martha is an average student from a family of low socioeconomic status. She is a caucasian female who is large for her age and unkempt in her appearance. Martha is a very sweet and loving girl who is always willing to help. She reacts positively to any attention or praise given, working extra hard to win teacher approval. Her experiences with computers has been limited to school and she has never heard of Virginia PEN.

Harriet

Harriet is an African-American female who is also from a low socioeconomic background and a single parent home. She lives in the "projects". She is a self described "average student" who has difficulty

writing. She also uses computers at school only and had had no experience with Virginia PEN previously.

Isaac

Isaac is an African-American male who is very outgoing. He is very large for his age but very gentle. He is a very well respected member of the class who is good in sports and academics. He attends QUEST, a gifted program in the school system. He has had previous experience with the Virginia PEN network and has a computer at home.

Paul

Paul is a caucasian male who is very shy. He often stutters when talking and appears very nervous. He is an average student that is very knowledgeable in certain subjects that are of interest to him. He enjoys reading and using computers. Paul has a computer at home but he has never used Virginia PEN.

Design of the Study

Introduction of Subjects to TJ On-Line

Students in a fourth grade were surveyed to determine computer background and experience. The students were introduced to History Exchange's Interactive Resource section on Virginia PEN that features a

discussion group with Thomas Jefferson. The students reviewed previous submissions from students across the state to the Thomas Jefferson On-line discussion group. After students were familiar with the network exchange format and the capability for long-distance exchange, they were divided into groups to draft a letter to Thomas Jefferson that would be aired on the network. Four students, the subjects in this study, were selected at random to type the letters on the network.

The students logged onto the network using my account and established communication with Thomas Jefferson. Students corresponded with Jefferson by asking questions about things they were learning in their study of the Revolutionary Period and telling about themselves and the period of history in which they existed.

Jefferson responded to the letters and the students wrote back. He often asked a question in his responses to set up a back and forth dialogue between the students and himself. This exchange was completed twice for a total of four letters.

Observation

During this process I continued to observe pupils and note behavior and attitude. I was looking for interest- are the students attending to and curious

about the task at hand? I was looking for enthusiasm- are the students excited by the task? I was also looking at motivation- do the students want to do this and why?

Students were required to draft any material in writing before it was aired on the network. This work was proofread by other students and self corrected before being placed on-line. This work was rated according to attention to detail and quality of work. Any improvements would note that the utilization of telecommunications in the classroom enhances pupil performance and increases motivation and enthusiasm for learning.

Interviews

In addition to observing the students as they worked, the participants were also interviewed after the project had concluded. Their immediate reactions to their experiences on VA PEN were documented. Additionally, I was fortunate enough to have had the opportunity to interview a number of the facilitators who help keep TJ On-line running. These interviewees included "Thomas Jefferson" as well as network administrators in Richmond.

Analysis

Credibility of the Study

This study began informally in the Fall of 1992 and continued

throughout the Spring of 1993 creating an extended period of engagement between myself and the participants of the study. Additionally, in order to further substantiate the findings of this study, I have relied upon multiple sources for my data collection and analysis. By using observation, interviews, and student work to reach my conclusions, I have relied upon three separate and distinct sources of information to support my conclusions.

Dichotomous Analysis

The information provided in the three resources was dichotomously analyzed to see if it reflected increased motivation and interest levels among the student participants. Using three sources of data, I looked for patterns that would support or dispel the claim that telecommunications motivates students to improve the quality of their work and interests students in subject matter.

Assessment of Letters

After the students had written their letters and placed them on-line, the letters were analyzed for correct form, attention to detail, and overall quality of work. As letters were compared to one another, distinct patterns began to emerge. (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) Students were careful to use correct letter format. They consulted class notes and history texts to validate any statements they made concerning Jefferson. Additionally, they relied on knowledge they

had obtained from a recent trip to Monticello to base their inquiries. Similarly, they consulted dictionaries and used one another to correct any errors in spelling or form. This type of behavior was a marked change from their normal approach to writing and social studies.

The letters seemed to create a bridge between the history of the past and the present with students engaged in dialogues with Jefferson concerning not only events in his lifetime, but current events and people such as the UVA basketball team. This historical exchange continued throughout the duration of the study with students taking pride in their ability to share knowledge with Jefferson.

Observation

As the students completed their letters to Thomas Jefferson, I observed their behavior. Students were very excited about having their work put on-line for other students across the state to read. As the students worked in their groups, they were very careful to select issues and questions that would be of interest to their audience. As a group, the students decided which questions they would include in the final draft of the letter. Martha wanted to " tell him we are coming to Monticello soon and ask him about the men's basketball team".

All students were actively involved in the writing process. While in the group several students became very excited about the points they were trying to make reflecting their excitement in hand gestures. In particular, Paul who is normally a shy person, was especially animated in his delivery of suggestions for the letter's content.

The students' excitement peaked when they received their first on-line responses to the letters they had written Jefferson. They immediately began drafting responses and answering questions he had posed in his reply. The second response was completed on an individual basis with students focusing more on individual concerns and questions.

Interviews

In interviews the students said they enjoyed their experiences with Thomas Jefferson On-Line for a variety of reasons. Harriet stated "the letters had more details of his life than our book". She especially liked the fact that Jefferson used her name when responding to her inquiries. Martha was amazed that writing in social studies could entail something besides "workbook pages and answering questions in the blue book". Isaac was delighted to be the one to inform Mr. Jefferson that the floor of Monticello was being restored to the original shade of green that it had been during Jefferson's life.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The Thomas Jefferson On-Line discussion group created an outlet for students to get "in touch" with the past. Thomas Jefferson was brought to life as a result of the written exchanges on the network. History and Jefferson no longer appeared as distant as the students had previously perceived. Through the network and the efforts of Robin Gabriel, the Director of Education at Monticello's Visitor Center, Thomas Jefferson became a human being who was very much interested in the lives and times of the students who wrote him. To the students using the network, history was no longer a one sided study of the past that was of no interest to them. The on-line interaction transformed the subject into an interactive exchange of knowledge and ideas that would have otherwise been impossible.

The results of the study confirmed the literature's findings that telecommunications enhances pupil motivation and interest in learning. Students responded with marked enthusiasm and with an overwhelming motivation to work on the project. Students such as Harriet who previously found it difficult to write found renewed purpose and "something real to write about". The students enjoyed receiving mail on the network and responding to

the questions they were asked by Thomas Jefferson.

This novel appraoch to history coupled with an audience that included Thomas Jefferson and their peers across the state created a forum for the excited students to air their best work. Students were very careful to look up correct spellings, use correct letter form, and validate historical facts before airing their letters on the network. Everyone wanted to present their work in its best form. This coincides with Mulligan and Gore's findings on the positive role telecommunications can play in modern education.

Like the students working on the Earth Lab project sponsored by the Bank Street College of Education, cooperation among students participating in this study increased as a result of the on-line exchanges. Students used one another as references and proofreaders of their work before they aired it in the network. They discussed possible discussion topics with one another and reflected on Jefferson's responses together. The role of the teacher shifted to that of facilitator rather than the primary source of information.

As a result of the two way exchange made possible through telecommunications, students became experts in their time period while at the same time developing a better understanding of the past. The students advised Jefferson of the way things are today and analyzed how and why they might

have been different during his life. As Martha recalled, " I liked telling Mr. Jefferson about basketball because he had never heard of it. Can you believe they didn't have basketball? "

In conclusions, it appears that the results of this study of the motivational effects of networks on students coincides with the literature that exists on the subject. When students are writing for a larger audience of their peers, they are more careful and thoughtful in their work. Additionally, when the students feel as if they have something important to contribute to an exchange, such as information about their period of history, they become more interested and involved in the learning process. The increased collaboration and cooperation among students working on this telecommunications projects likewise confirms the findings of the existing research.

The use of telecommunications such as VAPEN's Thomas Jefferson On-line discussion group allows students to experiment with the technology of the future while at the same time developing a better understanding of the past. Additionally, telecommunications projects like Thomas Jefferson On-line allow for increased use of written and oral communication skills.

Such discussion groups are the result of the efforts of innovative network facilitators who have made this forum for exchange possible. As

"Thomas Jefferson" or Robin Gabriel says, " 99% of the job is to get students interested" and she along with Virginia PEN's architects and numerous facilitators have certainly done just that through the limitless opportunities for learning that exist on the network.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Thomas Jefferson On-Line and similar projects were the result of the advances in telecommunications and the innovation of many devoted educators. We have only begun to explore the possibilities of networks in our schools. The future holds limitless opportunities for ventures such as this. The proposed national information infrastructure of the Clinton administration will make telecommunications readily available across the country. It is up to educators to capitalize on this enormous opportunity. Not only can we use networks to motivate and interest students, but more importantly we can better prepare our students for the future by familiarizing them with the technology that will soon be a part of their everyday lives.

Future Studies

This study is intended to be the beginning of my continued inquiry into the instructional applications of telecommunications in schools. I hope to continue my efforts to persuade educators of the instructional value of the Virginia Public Education Network. As a teacher in the schools, I hope to actively use the network in my classroom with a larger group of students. I

would also like to explore the instructional applications of the network in disciplines other than social studies. Since there were certain time constraints for this project, the scope was somewhat limited in that respect.

I have included tutorial for using the network in the appendix of this paper. It is a straightforward guide to accessing the telecommunications resources available on Virginia PEN. Its purpose is to give teachers the basic knowledge essential to successful networking without overwhelming them with the fine details that come with experience.

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Figure 1
Student Work downloaded from the Virginia Public Education Network

Newsgroups: va-pen.history-online
From: tj@uva386.schools.virginia.edu (Thomas Jefferson)
Subject: Re: Jefferson On-Line
Organization: Virginia's Public Education Network (Charlottesville)

Dear Mr. Jefferson,

Mr. Jefferson, I would like to know if you were still alive today if you would come visit schools around you?

Also, if Jouett hadn't warned you about the British what would have happened to you?

Finally, I would like to know what you think about the UVA men's basketball team.

Sincerely,
Martha

Dear Martha,

If I were still alive I would definitely be visiting schools around Monticello and also in my travels. Education is of interest to me and I feel very strongly that everyone should have the opportunity to learn to read and write.

If Mr. Jouett had not warned me about the advancing British troops I most probably would have been captured by the British. I would then have been sent to England to be put on trial as a traitor. I am most sure that I would have been found guilty of this crime against the King and therefore I would have been put to death.

You ask what I think of the University of Virginia's men's basketball team. I have to tell you that I am not familiar with this game. Please tell me more about it? I do not personally feel strongly about any game that is conducted with a ball. I prefer instead sports like riding.

Sincerely,
Th. Jefferson

Figure 2

Newsgroups: va-pen.history-online
From: tj@uva386.schools.virginia.edu (Thomas Jefferson)
Subject: Re: Jefferson On-Line
Organization: Virginia's Public Education Network (Charlottesville)

1300 Long Street
Charlottesville VA 22901
March 10, 1993

Dear Mr. Jefferson,

I went to your house Monticello yesterday. I walked under your house. I also saw the ice house. My class and I walked on Mulberry Row. The most interesting thing in your house was the library. I went to a pond next to your house and there was a dead fish in it. There were still three alive. What I want to know from you is why didn't you all sleep on flat mattress. I noticed your mattresses were very uneven.

In response to your question about basketball. You play the sport with a round orange ball. There are two teams and whoever scores the most points wins.

Your friend,
Martha

Dear Mistress Martha,

I am most pleased that you enjoyed your visit to Monticello last week. Thank you for letting me know about the dead fish in my fishpond. I have not looked in it for some time and I am sure that it will need to be cleaned out - especially now that we have had a splendid blizzard.

To answer your question about my uneven bed...it is filled with down feathers in the winter. Just like your present-day pillows and quilts, my bed gets lumpy when it is fluffed up. This air in the mattress helps to keep me warm and is quite comfortable to sleep upon. I am not sure if you saw it on your recent visit, but I also have a very warm coverlet that is lined with animal fur. You can imagine how cold Monticello gets in the winter - once my ink froze on the tip of my pen when I was trying to write a letter! Just for your information, it is often common for us to switch mattresses in the summer in order to keep cool. Our summer mattresses are often stuffed with straw or corn husks.

Your basketball game sounds interesting. I do not much enjoy team sports and think that I would probably not like to play it.

Sincerely yours,
Th. Jefferson

Figure 3

Newsgroups: va-pen.history-online
From: tj@uva386.schools.virginia.edu (Thomas Jefferson)
Organization: Virginia's Public Education Network (Charlottesville)
Date: Tue, 16 Mar 93 14:53:44 GMT

1300 Long Street
Charlottesville, VA 22901
March 16, 1993

Dear Thomas Jefferson

Yesterday I went to your house for the fifth time, and I've had more fun each time I've gone there.I collect all types just like you.Did you invent the polygraph or did you get it from France? What was the subject that you were most interested in. I know you studied just about everything. Your house is in pretty good shape. The guides are doing a very good job. They wouldn't let us touch anything but the floor. They found out that your floor was green so they painted it.

Sincerely,
Isaac

Dear Master Isaac,

I am so please that you enjoyed yourself at my home. No I did not get the polygraph from France but rather I acquired it from a friend of mine, Mr. Charles Wilson Peale of Philadelphia. I have purchased a number of these wonderful devices, both for the President's House in Washington City and for my personal use at Monticello. Have you any device that is similar to my polygraph?

Sincerely yours,
Th. Jefferson